

Curtain Wall(s) – On Felipe Mujica’s Installations José Luis Falconi

On a balmy night in July 2006, in Brooklyn, when Felipe Mujica showed me one of the first curtains he was diligently, but almost secretly, working on, he also showed me the work of Franz Erhard Walther. It was late at night, but he had this little book, which he had gotten somewhere in Europe, with black and white photographs of some remarkable pieces of geometrical shapes produced by Walther’s “fabric-objects”—wearable or usable material sculptures—in the 1960s. Since then, the two have become intertwined in my mind; whenever I see the work of Walther, I remember Mujica’s curtains; and now that Mujica’s curtains are rightly ubiquitous in so many important museums (it was about time!), whenever I run into one of them, I end up remembering Walther’s work. This unconscious association of the two is without doubt a compliment to both.

In this essay, I will speculate on this fortuitous, and seemingly arbitrary connection between these two artists, as I have a hunch that it might prove revelatory (beyond my autobiographical recollection) to understand the appeal of Mujica’s pieces in his recent show entitled *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?*¹ (What Were You Thinking About, the Past or the Future?). It is a show that is, at first glance, as much objectual as it is a unique, prolonged spatial gesture across two rooms of the museum. Dwelling on the merits of this fortuitous anecdote—making it my unexpected method of inquiry—might yield productive because it allows us to start with a principle that might seem basic but is crucial to understanding how the appeal of Mujica’s pieces unfolds: from the onset, they extend a tacit invitation to be “activated” in relation with the spectator. In other words, Mujica’s pieces first acquire their appeal through their precise denomination, through their naming—these are “curtains” and not flags, banners, or garments, for example—and then through their careful crafting as objects that might look familiar, but are actually—in their composition and spatial disposition—ultimately unfamiliar. A curtain always stands in relation to us, it is a curtain because it is placed ahead of or behind us.

Nonetheless, it is much more than mere anti-nominalism that does the trick here. Yes, to some extent it means that the pieces rely heavily on their designation, on the perennial properties of whatever “curtain-ness” might mean, but this resource is not particularly different from any other work of art which uses certain objects that produce strong and rapid identifications—quodidian objects, emblems, symbols,

all work in this same way. The point is, to confront a rather enigmatic piece of cloth under the description of “curtains” necessarily triggers a particular spatial relation with it; one is persuaded to position one’s body before or behind it. It imposes, demarcates a space and requests one’s own body to stand in relation to it; at home it separates one from the outside, on the stage it serves as backdrop, etc. One ends up necessarily choreographing oneself with a curtain, and Mujica knows this all too well.

But this choice is just the first step. The second, and perhaps most decisive step is the way in which the pieces start to acquire a unique force by how they are intervened upon—the geometrical motifs—and the way they are displayed (usually hanging up and usually in close relation with other curtains, sometimes creating a maze, other times creating a “cloth line”). Both push the condition of each of these curtains as, first and foremost, a relational object to a point of no return.

Consider the two rooms at his *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?* exhibition: they both seem to be two parts that complete a single gesture in which the spectator is enveloped by a set of curtains that cut the museum space, creating precariously new spaces. In one room, the space is reduced by half, and one is suddenly surrounded by the enigmatic banners, installed at a precise height that is neither high above (like a flag) nor coming from the very bottom. They are installed, somehow, in the middle, leaving us enough space to appreciate the motifs at a distance, but to also feel them in all their materiality—to be “in touch” with them, to be sheltered in this new space.

To be clear, this is not a case of a “penetrable”—a generic space that is transformed into a total immersible space, most times sealed out from its surroundings in order to produce a desired effect (think of any of J. R. Soto’s penetrables, for example)—but quite the opposite; the curtains depend on their contrast with the solidity of the museum or gallery walls in order to create what appears to be a precarious structure, carved out of the gallery space. Thus, one might question why we separate the spaces. Who performs that kind of gesture and for what reason?

The answer is simple: the gesture is not to seal the space but to elegantly put into question the walls of the space by using them, by doubling them, by mimicking them. By appealing to a function of curtains

1. Exhibition presented at the Museo de Artes Visuales MAVI UC, Santiago de Chile between August and November 2022. This exhibition is Mujica’s first museum show in Chile.

that is common in the most precarious places of the region—curtains which give an illusion of separating spaces where architecture fails, where there is no possibility of constructing a wall—the installation of these pieces positions the curtains as perhaps the most subtle criticism of the walls of the museum itself and, therefore, of an institution. To put it succinctly, just as the curtains are placed taking into consideration the architecture of the space (notice how they accentuate their angles), they also criticize it, call it into question. And more importantly, the curtains display such subtle criticism by using the very language of architecture and geometry. Behind the elegance and soberness of the display, there is a battle of geometries.

For this reason, I am not quite certain I agree with the assumption that the place for generating a reading of the curtains is their geometric designs, as it has been commented on before and is underscored in most press releases of Mujica's work. They are necessary, for sure. They add a precise layer of enigma. Most of them are as fascinating as they are intricate—providing a space for the artist to mark each piece of them according to place, circumstances, and people who have collaborated in its fabrication—but these motifs cannot be evaluated outside the piece's spatial disposition, as it tends to further situate the piece, the way it is installed and exhibited. Sure enough, the motifs enhance their phenomenonic presence, complicating it to the point of making the curtains both a spectacle and a backdrop, but their efficacy depends on their hanging, and Mujica, as we have seen, knows this all too well.

But there is more, as it is impossible not to consider the position of the spectator in this subtle battle of geometries choreographed by Mujica in *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?*. Where do we stand? As I mentioned, the show largely runs on the capacity of the curtain to overdetermine its activation and to therefore put us in a “geometrical relation” with them. Nonetheless, as we have also seen, this geometrical relation is largely dependent on the way they are displayed—the hanging, how they open or use the angles and corners, and the way they carve unexpected spaces within the white cube. In other words, suddenly, we are not just spectators but precarious dwellers of a very precarious structure that inhabits as well as questions the museum walls.

It is this dimension which, I think, ultimately differentiates the work of Mujica from that of Walther.

While Walther's “fabric objects” may lay dormant in the gallery, and may or may not be activated, Mujica's pieces are active from the onset, and they never stop being active. Moreover, Mujica's pieces are special for the manner in which they inhabit the white cube and enter the gallery space. Walther's pieces always request central stage, while Mujica's ones could enter the gallery quietly, almost imperceptible—as if they were impossibly shy.

And it is this effect, to feel that the pieces could exist almost quietly, discretely, that is needed for their successful staging because all this would not be complete if one, as spectator/dweller, could not get close to the curtains to appreciate their materiality.

To put it more precisely, we are confronted closely with the other restrained battle displayed in front of our eyes, between the coarseness of the materials and the loftiness of the geometrical form. It is there that we can feel the pulse of another subtle battleground tucked inside the elegant, precise geometry of their designs—the best curtains included in the show are those which exhibit and display on their very surface the confrontation between the ideal plane of geometrical forms and shapes, and the way they are captured and placed on the fabric. It is the spectacle of the rubber meeting the road, so to speak: no matter how refined we aspire to be, in relation to an ideal plane, all human techniques look shoddy and feel coarse—and Mujica knows this all too well.

In fact, he knows it so well that he uses it as the other side needed to create the most improbable of echo chambers—not only showing us (once more) the sturdiness of fabric and textiles but, most importantly, effectively placing us in the middle of the constant battle between planes of existence: between viewing and inhabiting, between the ideal and the coarse, between the ephemeral and the concrete. And that is why there is a thunderous, incessant echo across *¿En qué estabas pensando, en el pasado o en el futuro?*. Behind its soberness, its seemingly subdued minimality, its impossible shyness, there is the latency of the confrontations that actually mark our life. So, get close to one of those curtains—inhabit the concrete precariousness that they offer to you—because Mujica has staged for us the show of our lives, or at least the one that touches on/questions the marks of our existence; the one in which all the curtains always remain.